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Shoreline

Vol. 15, Issue 2, February 2008

New Material Highlight: Hooper's Island Crazy Quilt

By Natasha Jones

The Nabb Research Center is delighted to be the new home of a 19th-century quilt from Hooper's Island in Dorchester County, Maryland, which was donated to the Center by Mary Silva and Larry Rogers of Silver Spring, Maryland, for preservation and educational display.

This quilt is a valuable addition to the Center's collection of material culture and resources about quilting. Early American quilts were made primarily by women and represent valuable sources of information about historical women's lives, concerns and ways of seeing the world.

This particular coverlet represents a style known as a "crazy quilt," and the name seems fitting because of the irregular shapes and colors typically used in the construction of such a quilt. Many people assume that is the origin of the word. But in fact, the name comes from a type of ceramic glaze called "crazing," which is a technique that deliberately creates a cracked effect in the glaze of a vessel.

This technique was common in 19th-century Japanese ceramics, to which American audiences were introduced during the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. At the Exposition, the Japanese Bazaar was a particular success, enchanting American audiences. In the July 1876 edition of *Atlantic Monthly*, a journalist reported that the artistic works in the Bazaar exhibited "a grace and elegance of design and fabulous perfection of workmanship which rival or excel the marvels of Italian ornamental art at its zenith."

High praise indeed, and it is true that the appreciation for Japanese design styles had a profound effect on American arts and crafts, inspiring the Art Nouveau movement and giving birth to the crazy quilt. Along with the name originating from the glazing used in Japanese ceramics, crazy quilt designs also represent a nod to the Japanese aesthetic with their use of bright colors, rich fabrics, asymmetrical shapes, and motifs of birds, fans and botanicals.

The Hooper's Island coverlet is a splendid example of this style of quilt, containing the motifs and rich fabrics common to 19th-century crazy quilts. This attractive item has also provided a reminder that historical work is often similar to detective work. There is no name or date stitched into or written on the quilt, so we do not know exactly who constructed it. Yet with investigative work, it is possible to draw certain conclusions about the quilter and, by extension, the community in which she lived.

Even without a date, we can tell that the quilt was most likely made between 1896 and 1901. And even without a name, it is possible to ascertain that the quilter was of a relatively high economic standing, most likely of Scottish descent (or married to someone who was), and a Republican.

How can we determine this? It is the quilt itself that tells us that she was fairly well-to-do because the fabrics used in its construction are high in quality and cost.

The quilt also reveals that she was probably of Scottish descent because of the presence of an embroidered thistle in a quilt block. Thistle is not common to Japanese design, but it is the official emblem of Scotland. Population records reveal that, historically and to this day, Dorchester County has a higher rate of people claiming Scottish descent than the rest of Maryland or the U.S.

Along with the individual touch represented by the thistle, this quilt has another element that reveals something about the identity of the quilter: a block with an American flag and a hand holding a top hat. This is a unique symbol to see on a quilt, and its symbolism remained a mystery until an 1896 political poster for William McKinley was discovered. The poster shows him holding a top hat, and further research revealed that this was a symbol commonly associated with McKinley (similar to the stovepipe hat associated with Abraham Lincoln).

To further connect the dots, McKinley was favored by Marylanders in the 1896 election and was Dorchester County's candidate of choice. President McKinley was also of Scottish descent. And for those whose presidential history is a little rusty, McKinley was assassinated in 1901. The quilt would have been made between his campaign in 1896 and his passing in 1901.

We cannot be sure of the exact date, but we can see that while our quilter remains anonymous, she is not completely without identity. She had access to the media that popularized the crazy quilt, the resources to construct a piece that, to this day, is recognized as a fine piece of work... and she had opinions about politics.

The 19th Constitutional Amendment (granting women the right to vote) was not passed until 1920, but as we can see by this quilt, which was constructed two decades before the success of the Women's Suffrage movement, even a woman in a sleepy fishing village on Maryland's Eastern Shore had an opinion... and because of this quilt, she also had a voice.

The adventure of investigating the Hooper's Island quilt offers a reminder of why it is important to rely upon more than written documents when studying history. The job- and the joy–for historians is to locate the places where these subtle voices were recorded... where they were stitched–in this case, quite literally–into the fabric of a person's life, left behind for us to discover, interpret and share.

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2008 Washburn Lecture Series

On Tuesday, April 15, the Nabb Research Center welcomes Dr. Richard J. Blackett of Vanderbilt University to deliver this year's Washburn Distinguished Lecture in American History. Dr. Blackett is a historian of the abolitionist movement in the U.S. and the author of several African-American history books. The lecture, "Taking Leave: Fugitive Slaves and the Politics of Slavery, 1850-1860" is in the Wicomico Room of the Guerrieri University Center on the main campus of Salisbury University at 7 p.m. and is open and free to the public. For more information, please call 410-543-6312.

Miles-Stevenson Research Prize

The Nabb Research Center congratulates Mary Sarah Kneebone of Mt. Airy, Maryland, on winning the Fall 2007 Miles-Stevenson Research Prize. The prize is awarded each semester to a student taking History 330 at Salisbury University. Students in the class are required to write a biographical sketch on an Eastern Shore settler from the 17th or early 18th century based upon primary source material found at the Center. The papers are judged on their accuracy, depth of research and creative presentation of the settler's life story.

Mary is a history major in her junior year at Salisbury University. For her paper, she related the life of John Kirke, a planter who emigrated north from Virginia into Maryland and settled around the Watkins Point area. In recognition of her scholarship, the paper will be published in the June issue of *Shoreline* and she will also receive a monetary award. She plans to pursue a career as a high school history and Spanish teacher and we wish her the best of luck. Congratulations, Mary!